

A Note on the Chinese Newspaper *Jit Sheng*¹

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Abstrak: Kita mempunyai bukti yang cukup bahawa sebuah akhbar mingguan berbahasa Cina dengan judul *Jit Sheng* pernah diterbitkan di Singapura pada tahun 1858, iaitu 23 tahun sebelum munculnya akhbar *Lat Pau* pada tahun 1881. Walau bagaimanapun, oleh kerana ketiadaan naskhah-naskhah akhbar *Jit Sheng*, maklumat mengenainya hanya boleh didapati dari sumber-sumber lain yang menunjukkan bahawa ianya merupakan sebuah media berguna kepada masyarakat Cina sungguhpun tempoh terbitannya tidak lama.

Abstract: There is sufficient evidence to show that a Chinese weekly newspaper under the title of *Jit Sheng* was published in Singapore in 1858, 23 years before the appearance of the *Lat Pau* in 1881. However there are no extant copies of the *Jit Sheng* and information about it has to be culled from contemporary sources which indicate it to be a lively though short-lived media for the Chinese community.

For the past few decades, historians have unanimously agreed that the *Lat Pau* published in 1881 was the first Chinese newspaper which appeared on the cultural scene of Singapore as well as in the whole of the Nanyang region.² This view needs to be revised now as new historical data has surfaced.

In 1970, Cecil K. Byrd mentioned in his *Early Printing in the Straits Settlements, 1806–1858* that, From scattered published sources, references have been found which would seem to furnish conclusive evidence that at least two Chinese weeklies were published during the period under review: *Tifang Jih Pao* (Local News, 1845), and *Jit Sheng* (Rising Sun, 1858), printed at the Mission Press.³

It looks like this interesting statement has not aroused any scholar's attention. I was very keen to know on what grounds Byrd had made such an important statement, since he has no references to it in his book. To date I am unable to locate any evidence as to the existence of the *Tifang Jih Pao*. Two pieces of evidence concerning *Jit Sheng*, however, have been found. They strongly support Byrd's observation that a weekly Chinese newspaper by the title of *Jit Sheng* was published in Singapore in 1858. The first piece of documentary evidence is to be found in volume 1 of the *Straits Government Gazette*.⁴ A commercial advertisement put up by a certain Thompson Wm. Smith reads as below:

* Librarian, National Library of Singapore.

¹ This is a revised version of the articles entitled 'The *Jit Sheng* published in 1858 appeared 23 years earlier than the *Lat Pau*' jointly written by this author and Mr Wong Hong Teng, lecturer at the Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 11 July 1982) and 'A piece of historical material on the *Jit Sheng*' by this author (*Lianhe Zaobao*, 8 March 1987) (both are in Chinese). Any errors in this article, of course, are mine.

² See, for instance, Chen Mong Kock, *The Early Chinese Newspapers of Singapore, 1881–1912*. Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1967. p. 14.

³ Cecil K. Byrd, *Early Printing in the Straits Settlements, 1806–1858*. Singapore: National Library, 1970. p. 17.

⁴ *Straits Government Gazette*, Vol. 1, No. 20 (14 May 1858): 90.

**NOTICE
TO AUCTIONEERS, BROKERS, SHOP-KEEPERS
AND OTHERS.**

The undersigned begs to intimate, that he at present publishes a Weekly Newspaper in the Chinese Language, called the *RISING SUN*, which obtains a wide circulation amongst the Chinese Traders in Singapore and elsewhere.

The *RISING SUN* therefore furnishes a first-rate advertisement medium.

TERMS:

50 words or under . . . first insertion . . . \$1.00

100 words or under "2.00

Subsequent insertions half the above charges.

The *RISING SUN* is issued every Monday, advertisements received at the *Mission Press* up to Saturday evening.

THOMPSON Wm. SMITH

Singapore, 14th May, 1858.

The same advertisement was repeatedly published 17 times for more than five months in the *Gazette*. It last appeared in the issue of the *Gazette* dated 5 November 1858.

The fact that the *Jit Sheng* was published in Singapore is reinforced by another piece of evidence to be found in Thomas Dunman's letter dated 31 August 1858 which was submitted to the Governor of Singapore. His letter is to be found in the *Straits Settlements Records Series W 27*. In that long document, Dunman, the Commissioner of Police in Singapore at that time, reveals the 'monster evil' of the secret societies in Singapore, the strength of the police force and the tactics for suppressing the illegal organisations. In the submission, there are a few lines which read as follows:

The principal Chinese (in Singapore) are well acquainted with what is taking place in other parts of the world. They learn this from mixing with Europeans, from newspapers — they have a paper now printed in the Chinese character, the principal items of passing events being copied unto it and there is little doubt but that most of the Chinese learn from their better brethren all which is taking place....⁵

Though Dunman did not mention the title of the Chinese newspaper, undoubtedly, he was referring to the *Jit Sheng*.

The above-mentioned documentary proofs are of paramount importance for studying Chinese journalism not only of Singapore but also of Southeast Asia and China. They are of great significance for three reasons.

Firstly, they indicate that as early as 1858 a Chinese weekly newspaper, *Jit Sheng*, was published in Singapore. The paper was published 23 years earlier than the *Lat Pau* (the first issue of which appeared on 10 December 1881). The weekly was meant for the purpose of purveying news. It was different from *Ch'ai Shih-su Mei-yueh t'ung-chi Ch'uan* 蔡世俗每月統記傳 (*Chinese Monthly Magazine*) founded by William Milne in 1815 in Malacca which ceased publication immediately after the death of the founder in 1821. Claimed as the first Chinese periodical produced in Malaya, this magazine was merely a religious publication introducing Christianity and knowledge of history, morals and science to its audience. The *Jit Sheng* was a commercial enterprise. It contained trade advertisements and commercial notices. Hence, we are able to say that the *Lat Pau* can no longer be considered as the first Chinese newspaper to be published in Singapore. As we have yet to confirm the existence of the *Tifang Jih Pao* which was supposed to have been published in Singapore in 1845, no statement as to whether or not *Jit Sheng* was the first Chinese paper to be published in Singapore can be made at this moment.

Secondly, all along scholars who wrote on the history of various ethnic language newspapers published in Singapore maintain that the first paper which appeared in the colony was in English (1824: *The Singapore Chronicle*), followed by Tamil (beginning of 1876: *Singai Warta Mahni*), then Malay (at the end of 1876: *Jawi Peranakan*) and in Chinese (1881: *Lat Pau*).⁶ The appearance of *Jit Sheng* makes us revise this sequence. The place of the Chinese newspaper in the publishing history of Singapore now follows immediately after the English and pre-dates both the Tamil and Malay papers.

Thirdly, from the historical point of view, scholars doing research on the global history of modern Chinese journalism generally believe that the *Chung Ngoi San Po* (*Chung Wai Hsin Pao* 中外新報, Sino-Foreign News) published in Hong Kong in 1858 was the earliest modern Chinese newspaper ever

⁵ *Straits Settlements Records*, Series W 27, Thomson Dunman to the Governor of Singapore, 31 August 1858.

⁶ See Wong Hong Teng, 'Hsin-chia-p'o pao-yeh te ch'i-yuan' (The origins of the Singapore press), in *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 1 (1977): 33.

produced in the world.⁷ The new historical evidence suggests that *Jit Sheng* can claim to be contemporaneous with the *Chung Ngoi San Po* and thus become one of the earliest modern Chinese newspapers to be published in any part of the world.

Based on the preceding evidence and other supplementary sources, I now attempt to present some preliminary observations on the *Jit Sheng*.

The publisher of the *Jit Sheng*, who might be its founder as well, was Thompson Wm. Smith, since the advertisement in the *Straits Government Gazette* was inserted by him. Though the notice said, 'advertisement received at the Mission Press', one should not be misled into concluding that the paper was published by the Mission Press. It is more reasonable to believe that the request to clients to submit advertisements to the office of the Mission Press was only for the convenience of the editor and the compositors. It is not an indication that the weekly was owned, published and distributed by the Mission Press. The Mission Press was merely the printer for Thompson Smith.

Very little is known about Thompson Smith. He lived in Waterloo Street, a place not far away from Government Hill (now Fort Canning) in Singapore. According to *The Royal Almanac & Directory for the Year 1859*, Smith also edited the English-language weekly newspaper *Straits Guardian*.⁸ He was therefore one of the earliest pioneer bilingual journalists in Singapore and South-east Asia as well.

The *Jit Sheng* was issued weekly on Mondays. At the moment, we do not know the exact publication dates of its inaugural and last issues. The first advertisement about the *Jit Sheng* was dated 14 May 1858. Subsequent notices were printed in the *Gazette* until the issue of 5 November 1858. There was a total of 18 advertisements for the period of five months, with an average of one advertisement a week. Furthermore, as the first advertisement said that the paper 'obtains a wide circulation amongst the Chinese Traders in Singapore and elsewhere', we may infer that it had been published and distributed at least some time before 14 May 1858. The disappearance of the advertisement inserted by the

publisher of the *Jit Sheng* in the *Gazette* after 5 November 1858 should not be interpreted as evidence that the newspaper had ceased publication as of that date.

The advertising rates of the *Jit Sheng* were one dollar for 50 words or below and two dollars for between 50 to 100 words. Subsequent insertions were charged half the rates. These terms were more costly in comparison with those of the English newspapers and periodicals of the period. The *Straits Government Gazette*, for instance, charged its clients one dollar for 12 lines (about 100 words), two dollars for a half column (about 250 words) and two dollars and fifty cents for one column (about 500 words).⁹ Subsequent insertions were also charged half of the rate. We do not know the exact reason for the publisher of the *Jit Sheng* to charge a higher advertisement rate. Was it because it had a wide circulation or was it because of the higher cost involved in producing a Chinese publication?

In the absence of any holdings,¹⁰ it is very difficult to discover much about the contents and nature of the short-lived *Jit Sheng*. From Dunman's brief statement, however, we know that together with the English language newspapers, the *Straits Times*, *Singapore Free Press* and *Straits Guardian*, the *Jit Sheng* enabled the principal Chinese in Singapore to be 'well acquainted with what is taking place in other parts of the world', with 'principal items of passing events being copied unto' it, undoubtedly from the contemporary English-language newspapers. One could therefore safely say that the weekly *Jit Sheng* offered its readers brief coverage of foreign and local news, most of them being translations of news items from the English-language papers. This fact is understandable as it would have been very difficult for the publisher of *Jit Sheng* to employ literate Chinese who could conduct interviews in English. So the publisher had to be satisfied with asking a few literate Chinese (most probably only one, as the *Lat Pau* had also one editor/reporter in the first few years in the 1880s) who understood some English and did translations from the English-language papers.

⁷ K'o Kung-cheng, *Chung-kuo pao-yeh shih* (The History of Chinese Journalism). Peking: San Lien Shu-t'ien, 1986, (reprinted edition of 1955). p. 73. See also Roswell S. Britton, *The Chinese Periodical Press, 1800-1912*. Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1933. pp. 39-40.

⁸ *The Royal Almanac & Directory for the Year 1859*. Singapore: Straits Times Press, 1859 p. 69. The first issue of the *Straits Guardian* appeared in March 1854, according to the *Straits Times* of 14 March 1854. It was first edited by Alfred Simondies.

⁹ *Straits Government Gazette*, Vol. 1, No. 31 (30 July 1858): 151.

¹⁰ No copies of the *Jit Sheng* are known to survive in public collections today. I have checked with the Department of Oriental Manuscripts & Printed Books, The British Library, Harvard-Yenching Library and other major libraries in Europe.

The size of the circulation of *Jit Sheng* is difficult to guess. Little beyond a crude estimate may be made, based upon the circulation of other papers published in the second half of the nineteenth century in Singapore. According to the *Straits Settlements Blue Book*,¹¹ circulation figures of the papers were as follows:

<i>Singapore Daily Times</i> (English)	150	} 1874 figures
<i>Straits Times</i> (English)	160	
<i>Straits Overland Journal</i> (English)	160	
<i>Lat Pau</i> (Chinese)	300	— 1885 figure

Though we are uncertain as to whether or not these figures were true statistical averages taken or merely hypothetical averages provided by the publishers or based on the number of copies sold, to a

certain extent they provide an approximate and incomplete guide to the circulation of each paper. In the words of Thompson Smith, the *Jit Sheng* did enjoy a 'wide circulation amongst the Chinese Traders in Singapore and elsewhere' (presumably distributed to the Chinese settlements in as far as the eastern Archipelago and Riau). Based on the other papers' circulation figures, it may be estimated that *Jit Sheng's* circulation would have been between 150 and 200 copies per issue.

After the demise of *Jit Sheng*, most probably at the beginning of 1859, there was a long period during which Singapore had no locally published Chinese newspaper. It was not until the end of 1881 that a wealthy and well-established Straits Chinese family founded the *Lat Pau* to serve the Chinese population in the colony.

¹¹ *Straits Settlements Blue Book for the Year 1874*. Singapore: Printed at the Government Printing Office, 1875. p. 260; *Blue Book for the Year 1885*. Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1886. p. SA2.